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ABSTRACT

Student objectives do not always coincide with curricular labels that reflect statutory language or the public's agenda for community colleges. Studies show that nearly half of the students enrolled in so-called transfer curricula may have no intention of transferring, and that sizeable percentages of students enrolled in occupational courses go on to baccalaureate-granting institutions. The fact that these classes carry transfer credit or are classified as job training classes is a function of college accreditation, staffing, and financing, having little to do with the perceptions or intentions of the students who are enrolled. Consequently, college effectiveness may be misrepresented by research findings which seem to show low transfer and job placement rates. New measures of institutional functioning are needed to differentiate curriculum content, which could be more accurately represented by labels such as Liberal Arts (including Science, Social Science, Humanities, and Fine and Performing Arts) and Skills (including Basic, Recreational, and Occupational Skills) from student intent. Student intent can be measured separately, using categories such as to prepare for transfer; prepare for a new occupation; gain skills to retrain, remain current, or advance in a current occupation; or satisfy personal interests. Categorizing the curriculum according to content would promote understanding of the colleges' role in providing general education, basic skills training, recreational skills, and occupational education for their communities. (EJV)

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LABELING COURSES AND STUDENTS

An ERIC Digest

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What are the components of the community college curriculum? Usually this question is answered in terms of assumed student intent: the transfer curriculum for those on the way to the baccalaureate; the occupational curriculum for those seeking employment in jobs requiring more than a high school diploma but less than the bachelor's degree; and community education for those not seeking occupational certificates or higher degrees. This curricular classification pervades statutory language governing authorized functions of community colleges and reflects the public agenda set for the colleges.

But these curricular labels erroneously confound course content with student intent, assuming that those in liberal arts programs will transfer, that those in occupational skills courses will not, and that those in noncredit curricula have no degree objectives. In fact, student objectives do not always coincide with curricular labels, leading to serious misconceptions of what college programs actually accomplish. Many students, for example, enroll in collegiate-level poetry classes or vocational automotive courses for avocational reasons that have nothing to do with transfer and employment. Yet the merit of so-called transfer and vocational programs is judged on the basis of transfer and employment rates.

In describing the community college curriculum, then, curricular content must be considered apart from student intent. This requires a curriculum classification based on course subject matter. Similarly, students should be categorized on the basis of their actual objectives, and not merely the programs in which they happen to be enrolled. Categorizing the curriculum by relating it to student intentions or behavior leads to a succession of errors, from inappropriate criteria for institutional success to distorted patterns of institutional finance.

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Research on Student Objectives

Available data on actual student intentions demonstrate that the so-called "transfer" and "vocational" curricula are misnamed. It is true that many community college courses award credit that can be transferred to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Similarly, many courses provide students with skills that can be applied on the job. But curricular labels mask the student's own agenda, which may be at odds with stated institutional functions.

National surveys conducted by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, for example, reveal that only about half of the students in courses offering academic transfer credit view transfer itself as their primary educational objective. In a survey of students taking transfer-credit, liberal arts courses at four large urban community college districts, 57 percent of the respondents indicated that preparation for transfer was their main reason for attending college. The remaining students had other priorities: to gain skills requisite to obtaining a new job (27 percent), to gain skills requisite to advancing in a current occupation (nine percent); and to satisfy a personal interest (seven percent) (Riley, 1984). A 1985 survey of students in transfer-credit courses at 28 urban community colleges yielded similar data: 53 percent of the students indicated that preparation for transfer was the primary motivation for enrolling, 32 percent indicated entry into a new job, eight percent marked advancement in a current occupation, and seven percent indicated personal interest (Cohen, Brawer, and Bensimon, 1985). The study also revealed that very few of the students exhibited behavior indicative of successful transfer, such as visiting an academic counselor, participating in transfer workshops, or examining the catalogs of baccalaureate-granting institutions. The transfer curriculum, then, serves large numbers of students who have no intention of transferring and whose behavior suggests that they probably never will.

Occupational curricula also serve individuals with diverse objectives. Follow-up studies of former vocational students, for example, routinely reveal that sizable percentages of these students, ranging from 10 to 30 percent, go on to baccalaureate-granting institutions (Palmer, 1985, pp. 20-23). These follow-up studies also reveal that many students in vocational programs enroll for reasons other than preparation for employment. Many want to improve skills used on jobs already held, and a significant number cite transfer or personal interest as the primary motivation for enrollment.

Hence a basic misconceptualization: the terms "transfer courses" and "occupational courses" are misnomers that should be abandoned because they confound student behavior with course content. The fact that these classes carry transfer credit or are classified as job training classes is an artifact of college accreditation, staffing, and financing. It has little to do with the perceptions or intentions of the students who are enrolled. Consequently, college effectiveness may be misjudged by those who cite seemingly low transfer rates (when transfer data are available) or who claim that too many vocational program graduates are not employed in fields for which they are trained. By the same token, some programs may be funded under the false assumption that they serve job-training or transfer functions exclusively.

New Measures

New measures of institutional functioning are needed to differentiate curriculum content from student intent. The content of the curriculum can be analyzed in a classification of course offerings by subject area. This can be done by counting the class sections that fall under the following headings:

Liberal Arts
- Science
- Social Science
- Humanities
- Fine and Performing Arts

Skills
- Basic (remedial writing, arithmetic, etc.)
- Recreational (sports, quilting, etc.)
- Occupational (typing, nursing, etc.)

Whether or not any or all of these courses are accepted for baccalaureate credit is irrelevant. The purpose of the classification is to determine the relative proportions of curricular effort in various content areas.

Student intent can then be considered separately. At registration, each student could be asked to state his or her primary reason for attending. The question could be asked as a forced choice among alternatives:

What is your most important reason for attending this college at this time?
(Mark only one answer)

____ To prepare for transfer to a four-year college or university

____ To gain skills necessary to enter a new occupation

____ To gain skills necessary to retrain, remain current or advance in a current occupation

____ To satisfy a personal interest (cultural, social)

This question can be placed on every student's registration card or asked in a survey of students in a sample of all class sections offered. Measures of success can be drawn by determining the percentage of students who attain their goal, with further subdivisions made according to the length of time it required for goal attainment.

Conclusion

Categorizing the curriculum according to its content would further our understanding of each college's role in providing general education, basic skills, recreational skills, and occupationally-specific training for the people of its community. Classifying student intentions would yield better

data on the types of people who are being served, the purposes for which they come to the college, and the extent to which they achieve these purposes. Such classifications could be used by state agenciesin allocating funds, within the colleges as an aid to resource allocation, and, not least, as a constant public information resource that would assist college spokespersons in explaining what their colleges actually do.

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